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Against Traffic: De/formations of Race and Freedom in the Art of Adrian Piper

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Lacking the certitude of a definitive partition between slavery and freedom, and in the absence of a consummate breach through which freedom might ambivalently announce itself, there is at best a transient and fleeting expression of possibility.

—Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*¹

Value denotes domination and endurance in a space of multiplicity. Its presence and performance entail the altering, resituating, and refiguring of the Other, or many Others, in margins, in recesses—indeed, paradoxically, outside a self-presence (defined by a fetishized boundary) that nonetheless aspires to be everywhere.

—Lindon Barrett, *Blackness and Value*²

This time I've really made it. I am invisible, disembodied, pure sexual desire, and the night holds no fears for me. Its spirits, indoors and out, are my old friends, and we coil through, around, and alongside people, and one another, exuberantly, shamelessly, knowingly.

—Adrian Piper, "Flying"³

I. The Abstraction of Freedom, the Freedom of Abstraction

In her introduction to *Scenes of Subjection: Terror and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*, Saidiya Hartman argues that an engagement with postbellum, Black expressive cultures must reconcile the “lack of a definitive partition between slavery and freedom.”⁴ Indeed, as Hartman observes, the transatlantic slave trade not only inaugurated the inextricable, bloodied connection between black subjectivity and subjection but continues to haunt black life in the postbellum era. Freedom is, following Hartman, “fleeting and transient,” an abstraction not yet historically realized.⁵ Yet, it is precisely the “fleeting and transient” qualities of anti-slavery freedom that constitute its persistent possibility.

Profoundly, like freedom, race also operates as a kind of transience as transient and transience indicate both a temporariness as well as an actual person in real and phantasmatic (epistemic, economic, ontological) movement, itinerant without fixed or localizable social position. Inasmuch as race, particularly blackness and black identity, indexes a particular and infinite set of lived social experiences, it simultaneously works to fix and unfix black people’s physical and social possibility. More precisely, it is the “elasticity” of blackness—its ability to mean and take on many different ideas, forms, and definitions as well as move and be moved by the empirical perambulations of xenophobic optics that has continued to affect the experience of black life from the antebellum era to the present.⁶ Reflecting on slavery’s vicious economies of captivity, Hartman writes,

Antebellum formations of pleasure, even those of the North, need to be considered in relation to the affective dimensions of chattel slavery since enjoyment is virtually unimaginable without recourse to the black body and the subjection of the captive, the diversions engendered by the dispossession of the enslaved, or the fantasies launched by the myriad uses of the black body. For this reason the formal features of this economy of pleasure and the politics of enjoyment are considered in regard to the *literal and figurative occupation and possession of the body*.⁷

Antebellum slavery’s figuration of blackness as an elasticized, plastic, simultaneously material and immaterial locale for the cruising of white empirical and epistemological desire facilitated the mass take-over and theft of blackness from itself. In that way, blackness and black people were objects of abstraction, “fungible” as commodities—nowhere and everywhere at the same time.⁸ Lindon Barrett is also attuned to the “nowhere and every-

where” of blackness and black value as it operates in the interstices of materiality and immateriality, presence and absence, form and formlessness, purpose and purposeless and continues to shape an experience of Blackness, of black life and (absent) presence in the United States. Along with Hartman, Barrett argues that the economic, epistemic, ontological, and metaphysical undecidability of blackness is embedded and emerges from a discourse on value. He maintains,

Blackness proves a commodity in a network of international markets. Additionally, however, beyond the legacy of mercenary Western impulses to fashion a “cheap and constant source of labor” with African bodies (Mullin 3), a further transaction concerns itself with efforts to determine African American consciousness. If the material economic transaction produces racial blackness as a phenotypical and commodifiable essence, the related transaction aims at producing blackness as a negative, discursive, cultural, and psychological essence.⁹

Ironically, in the post-emancipation era, black artists have experimented with a level of self-abstraction and objecthood that resembles the “coerced theatricalities of the trade” though this time in the interests of self-possession, anti-captivity, and a reclamation of consciousness from the site of its determinate and devalued negation.¹⁰ In particular, the art of black conceptual artist and philosopher Adrian Piper is moved by a positive engagement with self to the extent that self is not only the site of a radical commitment to presence but also the place for a radical disruption of the xenophobic systems of value and rationality. Piper’s intervention works at the level of an abstraction of self from the specificity of the racialized, classed, and gendered body to which it is attached. By messing with the coordinates of the spectator’s particular narrations of fungibility—Piper switches bodies in her *Mythic Being* series, for example—while using the nowhere-ness of blackness in her public revelation and transcendence of self, Piper invents new ways of being black and free in public. Broadly speaking, by philosophically improvising the relationship between presence and absence, materiality and immateriality, performance and philosophy, self-consciousness and self-abstraction, objecthood and selfhood, race and value, Piper consciously engages the “promiscuous” meeting ground where value, rationality, and their “dark Other side[s]” converge.¹¹ In doing so, new forms of valuation—both self-directed and spectatorial—become possible and the question of freedom itself can once again be properly asked.

II. Adrian Piper

African-American artist and Kantian philosopher Adrian Piper is a crucial figure in the expression of performance and philosophy's foundational arrangement.¹² In particular, her philosophically performative engagements with Kantian rational theory are centrally concerned with two premises: (1) That freedom, along the lines described by Kant, as "the absolute totality of the series of conditions for any given appearance,"¹³ can mean "freedom from roles induced by other's recognition"¹⁴; and (2) That race and difference have the potential to affect the integrity of a rationalizing process of self-preservation.¹⁵

Indeed, the ideas of freedom and rationality are constant sources of inspiration for Piper's art-making from 1967 to the present. Particularly, her *Catalysis* (1970-72) and *Mythic Being* (1972-76) series are organized around a set of philosophical investigations concerned with art's transformation in its empirical and "pseudo-rational" encounters with spectators. Piper argues,

We need rationality in order to be unified subjects, but a dilemma arises because our conceptual schemes are invariably inadequate in making sense of the plethora of experience, information, and new phenomena that bombard us daily. As we enter the global community, we are getting new information all the time about ourselves, about other people, about the world at large, about science, and about the universe. It's just too much, and it's all too unfamiliar. The complexity of our world has outstripped our conceptual resources for dealing with it. On the other hand, if we bracket these categories, then we are stuck with confusion and panic at all the anomalies that confront us, and we feel the threat of personal disintegration. So we have to try to maintain the appearance of rational consistency for the purposes of self-preservation. This is what I call pseudorationality. We deny some things. We rationalize other things. We dissociate phenomena that are too threatening to be incorporated. We try to shape this unmanageable conceptual input into a neat and coherent view of the world. We do this in science, we do it in politics, and we do it with individuals who are alien to us, people who look different, who talk differently, who don't fit our conception of how people ought to be and look. When we see people like this, we try to impose our categories. This is the paradox of human rationality; if we didn't have it, we couldn't function at all. Yet these rational categories are invariably inadequate and insensitive to the uniqueness of an individual.¹⁶

Exploring pseudorationality, Piper developed "nonmaterial art objects, unspecified with regard to time and space" under the assumption that the spectator/artistic consumer will epistemologically and philosophically shape the meaning and value of the art and performances by virtue of having experienced them.¹⁷

Further, what has also been essential for Piper is her self-positioning as the “nonmaterial art object unspecified with regard to time and place” which gets expressed self-consciously as a “catalytic object” and as “a neutral object with a problematic identity.”¹⁸ Piper’s becoming-object responded to, on the one hand her “insularity from political life” and on the other, questions concerning what it meant to be a black, female artist in historical, social, ontological, ethical, and economic terms.¹⁹ These contemplations lead to a set of conceptual musings on how the public and plastic manipulations of her own body—its becoming an entirely other catalytic object—can comment on this particular relationship with the outside world. Ultimately, Piper’s emergence in the city as first a catalytic object and then “a neutral object with problematic identity implie[d] not only that my properties cannot be categorically enumerated but also that I am not susceptible to evaluative judgment: Neither my identity nor my value can be conceptually assessed.”²⁰ In these pieces, Piper’s production of herself as “non-material” and “unspecified with regard to time and space” is instructive insofar as value is figured as coextensive with categorical enumeration. Following this reasoning, the question becomes, if it is the case that Piper is able to resist, trespass upon, as well as transgresses the categorical imperative, does Piper somehow move outside the prison-house of value?

In the *Catalysis* series, these movements outside of value’s teleological pull are manifested simultaneously in a self-objectification as well as the enactment of deliberately “uncategorizable” performances in public space. Significantly, Piper identifies these performances as catalytic in that they “induce a reaction within the viewer.”²¹ For example, Piper becomes a catalytic object by riding the bus, subway, and Empire State Elevator with a large bath towel stuffed into her cheeks. Catalytic, self-objectifying performances also include filling a purse with ketchup and pulling out her sticky wallet in the middle of Macy’s; walking down a busy New York City street covered with paint and wearing a “wet paint” sign; moving slowly down busy residential streets, “holding a continual monologue with myself . . . about myself.” “Defining the work as the viewer’s reaction to it” exposes how the viewer’s own categorical imperatives/response is the crucial contingency of the art’s legitimacy and success.²²

Tellingly, after this series was complete, Piper observed the striking disparity between “my inner self-image and the one they had of me.”²³ This is the disparity that influences Piper’s next artistic series, *The Mythic Being* series. This disparity between Piper’s own self-image and the visually pathological, racial, and sexual cat-

egorical enumeration of her objecthood by others was partly responsible for *The Mythic Being* series [MB]. But MB also had something to do with the man in the park. On a seemingly ordinary day in Washington Square Park, Piper was sitting with friends when she noticed a “seedy,” unkempt black man “smiling broadly and walk[ing] with a swagger.”²⁴ He was talking to himself in “a loud singsong voice” when approached by another man with a request for some spare change. The occasion of his response proved to be philosophically and performatively transformative for Piper.

“How can you take some cents from a man who got no sense? Huh? You know what I mean? Right? You can’ take nothin from a crazy man, you know? Cause no cents is nonsense, so it’s all the same to me, you dig?”

He then continued down the path, walking slowly, occasionally stopping in front of bench occupants, continually repeating,

“No cents is nonsense, right brother? Amean lahk you can’ take nothing from a crazy man, you dig? If he’s crazy don’ matter what you do. You CAN’ take nothing from ME man, you know whata mean?”

I was dumbfounded. He had done it—achieved a near perfect balance of behavior and self-consciousness. His knowledge, articulated in vociferous language, gave him almost total control. I thought of the piece I’d done about a year and half ago where I moved slowly down the street holding a continual, semi coherent monologue and making any passerby the object of my talking without altering the subject matter or style of my delivery. My piece suffered by comparison. This man’s performance seemed poetic; divinely inspired, in contrast to my own dry, overintellectualized effort.

It seems that the tension he achieved had a lot to do with the degree to which he could both EXPRESS his state of mind and also self-consciously acknowledge it.²⁵

The poetry of this black performance is embedded in an anti-incarceratory drive, articulated as a resistance to the pseudorational, categorical enumeration and valuations by others. This anticipatory consciousness in conjunction with a painfully radical semi-incoherence is instructive in demonstrating to Piper how objects not only speak back but know better. More profoundly, it is precisely this anticipatory consciousness and radically painful semi-incoherence that bridges this swaggering, loudmouthed, maybe “crazy” man in the park with a long tradition of black radicals who philosophically performed a self-conscious mode of indirection as resistance.

It was soon after this transformative encounter in the park that Piper began preparing for the *Mythic Being*. This preparation inaugurated a more intensive relationship between performance and philosophy, as all of the philosophical texts she needed to read

were deferred (only to be approached anew) by the persistent, internal demand to “spend four or five hours a day thinking or writing about art, diddling around on my guitar, doing a piece, etc.”²⁶ These compulsions to perform, to think about and write about art are part of this preparation. The other significant feature of Piper’s preparation involved the “threatening” task of “concret[izing] my spectator’s vision of myself as an object.”²⁷

For Piper, the self-conscious act of becoming-object involved negotiating the contradictions of value embedded in the tension between seeing oneself and being seen, private and public, inner and outer. It also meant anticipating an empirical maneuver of visual (racial, sexual, economic, psychological) evaluation and diverting the telos of other’s “designations.” In “Talking to Myself: The Ongoing Autobiography of An Art Object,” Piper muses,

[I]n cases where my actions are interpreted as “insane,” they are consistent with the external world just in that designation. My inner experience which gives coherence to my actions *to me*, has no recognizable way that has objective validity. [I]n the cases where my actions are objectively meaningless, my inner experience constitutes the only rules whereby my actions can be made intelligible. Because the external audience does not recognize my action, they must exist only in relation to me and for me. Here, the public exists only to provide a reflective consciousness of me as an object. But it is in the object rather than the subject that meaning and coherence are found.²⁸

The tension between being at once the object of consciousness as well as the conscious object motivates the philosophical performances of Piper’s post-*Catalysis* series, the *Mythic Being* (1973-74). Inasmuch as the object of consciousness refers to a racialized and gendered fungibility wherein Piper’s “meaning and coherence” are determined by the spectator’s own economic, racial, and epistemic investments, the conscious object subverts that possible spectatorial maneuver.²⁹ In particular, the conscious object uses her consciousness in negating the value of the empirical by producing outwardly meaningless actions recognizable (and perhaps, rational) only to the catalytic, conscious object herself.³⁰

Further, modeling the *Mythic Being* on the man in the park required that this tension within objecthood be mobilized in the name of a radical, often figured as “criminal” or “insane,” indirection. Indirection here refers to the object’s (of consciousness) ability to at once express an inner self while anticipating and sidestepping the telos of spectators’ evaluations. The man in the park does this by predicting and abstracting the evaluation, making his “craziness” the subject of a rhetorical game. By publicly perform-

ing an abstraction of the self, the spectator's possible, empirical encroachments are challenged. Moreover, Piper's respect for the man in the park's stylized indirection had everything to do with illuminating how self-consciousness itself can be the site of a radical improvisation. Further, inasmuch as consciousness of the self allows for an a priori internal sense of "meaning and coherence," it can also be the site of a transgression and abstraction of the personal.³¹ Piper's acknowledgement of this duality, while absolutely crucial for the development of the *Mythic Being* series, precipitated the rage of a "war inside me that was very tiring."³²

The war was between a spectator who evaluated and tried to determine the contingent movements of my body, and the part of me that abandoned control of my body, to my body and its instincts. The war was, that is to say, between the audience and the object of perception, both aspects of my consciousness.³³

In the *Preparatory Notes for the Mythic Being*, Piper articulates the tension between seeing oneself as a discrete body in space and time while also imagining oneself as capable of moving, meditating, and dancing beyond physical, social, ontological, and historical contingencies. Indeed, the discord between being a self-conscious object and a being able to transcend the contingencies of the internalized spectator is that which animates the complexity of the *Mythic Being* project. Piper's experience as a dancer, for example, also speaks to this conceptual aporia.

Beginning in 1965, Piper worked as a discotheque dancer in two New York City nightclubs, the *Ginza* and *Entre Nous*. She danced in a cage over the bar. Piper loved this job because it provided a deregulated space where she could move as if "all alone."³⁴ Despite the fact that there was an audience and her physical range of movement was contingent upon the size of the cage, Piper took pleasure in the infinite freedoms offered by dance. It is dance that overwhelms her and her relationship to self-consciousness, as it "induced [not only] a trance state [but] let her body take over."³⁵ As her body became her "guide," it loosened her hold on self-consciousness. Piper momentarily allowed herself to "become the music."³⁶ Becoming the music, Piper is able to transcend the tight-space of self-consciousness and, coupled with her insights learned from yogic meditation, begins to consider the "cosmic absurdity of my attempt to define myself."³⁷ Indeed, it is precisely the "absurdity" of self-definition that Piper's *Mythic Being* exposes.

As a *Mythic Being*, Piper donned an Auburn shag wig, reflecting sunglasses, black pants, turtleneck, and brown boots. She

assumed the gestures of a masculine image of herself, one that swaggered, “str[o]de, lope[d], lower[ed] my eyebrows, raise[d] my shoulders and [sat] with my legs apart on the subway, so as to accommodate my protruding genitalia” (117). The *Mythic Being*, while in different public spaces throughout New York City and Harvard University (Cambridge, MA) ran an internal monologue sometimes composed of fragments of Piper’s diary entries. Sometimes, the MB would incorporate into his dialogue aspects of an exchange with an unsuspecting bystander.

As the *Mythic Being*, Piper was allowed to do two things: (1) Self-consciously become her other, “a third-world, working-class, overtly hostile male” while meditating on the processes of her recognition as such; and (2) “Move without moving.”³⁸ Beginning with the former, Piper’s transformation into an independent and separate image of her opposite allowed her to move beyond the limits of her own self while also making explicit how the *Mythic Being* is the sign par excellence of its essential formlessness and elasticity, the self-conscious site of other people’s economic and epistemic wanderings. Appearing to be hollowed out, the *Mythic Being* “exists only in the perception of those who read his thoughts.”³⁹ At the same time, however, because his monologue weaves into and out of self-awareness, it compromises a causal argument linking what the spectators say about MB and what he thinks about himself. Because it is unclear who MB is apart from what is expressed in his monologue—existing as a perceived “neutral object with problematic identity,” as it were—Piper argues that his “properties cannot be categorically enumerated.”⁴⁰ Significantly, the necessarily aimless finitude of MB is extended by Piper’s own infinitude where, through disguise, she is able to wander along the limits of her desire and freedom (*Cruising White Women and Strutting*, 1974).

By incorporating her own diary entries into the ongoing monologue of the *Mythic Being*, Adrian Piper was able to tell and untell her story. Piper’s personal history is dispersed throughout MB’s monologue, allowing her to at once publicly objectify, release, and transcend the limitations of her personhood. At the same time, however, MB’s monologue is told as a series of diary-inspired yet nonetheless dislocated mantras, “meaningless sounds, depersonalized expressions ascribable to anyone and everyone: They are common property.”⁴¹ Of essential significance is the fact that the *Mythic Being* is physically rendered as a “third world overly hostile male.”⁴² It is precisely because *Mythic Being* was modeled after the racialized and sexualized outlaw figures of Piper’s New York—“alcoholics, panhandlers, freaks, crazies” (et al)—that exac-

erbated the xenophobic response to “what he said about himself.”⁴³ Xenophobia here is further compounded by MB’s association with the street, the “enabling absence” of white, middle-American civic presence.⁴⁴ Being in the street, being the street, disrupting traffic, Piper’s *Mythic Being* is an independent, abstract object that speaks someone else’s story where the someone else refers both to Piper as well as the xenophobic voiceovers of the city-citizen.

As Piper herself argues, racism and sexism produce a cultural situation where bodies of color become the site of a radical invasion, “forays into my selfhood designed to render my interiority transparent to an eye widened in terror.”⁴⁵ What the eye widened in terror presumes is that the “anomalous objects that do not conform to our presuppositions of what experience should be like or what objects should be like” wind up not entering consciousness.⁴⁶ They become either repressed or ignored.

The self-conscious racialization and criminalization of MB, then not only anticipates the invasion and repression/evasion but does the work of externalizing the personal. “Look but do not touch.” What’s great, though, is that the story MB tells to the ears and eyes widened in terror, both is and isn’t his story, both is and isn’t her story. The full story, in fact, is never told. There is a long history of full stories never told, where objects of ethnographic and empirical interest withhold or obscure their story. Hartman identifies the tradition of the duplicitous narrator as it operates within the slave narrative. Like the ex-slave Harriet Jacobs’s “loophole” that at once protected her from the pursuit of her master and the abolitionist reader, Piper’s *Mythic Being* similarly works to conceal “observer from observed, [allowing for] unobserved offensive action.”⁴⁷

Mythic Being’s “unobserved offensive action” consists of his ability to release Piper’s private story into the world in a form that disabled the empirical pull of the observer.⁴⁸ Fred Moten describes this “unobserved offensive action” as Piper’s intervention into “beholding” where beholding means “mess[ing] up or mess[ing] with the beholder.”⁴⁹ Returning to Piper, this critical exercise in beholding enabled the subsequent release and transfiguration of her past into “meaningless sounds, depersonalized expressions ascribable to anyone and everyone” allowing her to momentarily transcend the “limitations of [her] personality and physical appearance.”⁵⁰ In the context of the *Mythic Being*, Piper’s personality was dispersed into the gutters and half-closed ears of New York City. *Mythic Being*’s physical appearance, which for Piper is primary, is characterized by a radical otherness, a blackness that is pure surface and visibility. It is precisely through the use of blackness as a

portable, defensive surface that Piper experiments with the freedom of being everywhere and nowhere at the same time. In other words, as Piper occupies *Mythic Being*, she can explore what it means to be all surface, all aggression, and all confrontation, a “static emblem” of “everything you most hate and fear.”⁵¹ Being all surface is perhaps the end of objectification; however, as will soon become clear, Piper’s deployment of *Mythic Being*’s fungibility enables her protection behind his defensive and offensive surface while, at the same time, sustaining the integrity of her (Piper) interiority and privacy.

To be sure, this abstract criminality and condensed hostility—his ability to be “everything you most hate and fear”—in conjunction with the methodical, purposeful dispersion of the private details of Piper’s life, then, provides the perfect nexus for the *Mythic Being* to be everywhere. Because *Mythic Being* is physically rendered as a black, working class male, his “criminal” otherness subjects him to an array of pseudorational defenses. As Piper herself anticipates, xenophobia becomes the force that “coerces [Mythic Being into] an unknown [and unknowable] absence.”⁵² Further, Piper observes, the business of “defending ourselves intellectually against what we perceive to be a boundary violation” succeeds in “poisoning” the experience of the unique “singularity of the object or person.”⁵³ If *Mythic Being* cannot be rationalized, what he says is not received.

What’s more, pseudorationality allows Piper’s life to be dispersed into the streets of New York like the bullets of a machine gun. Without a proper witness, Piper’s story—the details of her life and personhood—are released into the anonymous city streets. Further, in an ironic twist, blackness provides the occasion for Piper’s own (transcendent) movement against capture where something like freedom—essentially transient and errant—becomes possible. Inasmuch as *Mythic Being*’s presence as an irrational “other” guarantees that what he says about himself will fall beneath the empirical register of the unsuspecting passerby, so too it becomes much more profound that what he speaks are the contours of Adrian Piper’s subjecthood. In a paradoxical maneuver, xenophobia becomes the particularly complicated site where Piper is both subject to as well as eludes the capturing pull of the empirical eye. Through *Mythic Being*, Piper achieves the condition of an abstraction. Her “personality and physical appearance” are dislocated and released from selfhood so that she can experiment with being an abstraction.

Approximately thirteen years after the completion of the *Mythic Being* series, Piper published *Adrian Piper: Reflections 1967-*

1987 (*The Alternative Museum*). As part of her reflections, Piper recalls a recurrent dream, "one of [her] most treasured."⁵⁴ In *Flying*, Piper describes the dream of flight. I quote from her recordings at length.

I spring from the ground, executing high leaps, *tour jetés*, turns, somersaults, twists, and twirls. I float effortlessly through these figures, can stay suspended in the air for as long as I like. My ballet and modern dance teacher, Miss Copeland watches, transfixed. I run and leap, flapping my arms, and take off. At first I am flying close to the ground and often land without wanting to. But by running faster, leaning further, and flapping harder, I eventually ascend higher and higher, far above the people below me, who are watching, marveling, trying to catch me by the feet and drag me down. I soar above them, twisting, dripping, gliding, leaving them in the distance. This part is not effortless, and not without anxiety. I have to work hard to stay sufficiently far above them so that they cannot get at me. It takes skillful maneuvering and energetic flapping to keep them at bay, but I manage it. Eventually I relax into my ability to stay afloat above them, even leave them behind completely, as long as I concentrate. I alight on the roof of a building to rest and decide where to fly next, realizing that I must stay on the move, ahead of them, so they won't catch up with me and drag me to the ground. I try to avoid landing on the sidewalk . . . I feel their hands closing around my ankles, I feel the glass crash around me as I emerge outdoors again, now spinning, twisting, bouncing off the sidewalk into the cool night air. I flap my arms gently float effortlessly above the streetlamps, to the treetops. This time I've really made it. I am invisible, disembodied, pure sexual desire, and the night holds no fears for me. Its spirits, indoors and out, are my old friends, and we coil through, around, and alongside people, objects, and one another, exuberantly, shamelessly, knowingly.⁵⁵

Piper's dream of flight where flight means leaving one's ground, sidewalk, and body provides an especially insightful glimpse into what the *Mythic Being* offered. At once the *Mythic Being* was pure surface and visibility as well as racialized and sexualized errancy, enabling Piper to momentarily imagine what being without a localizable personhood might feel like. *Flying* speaks to this desire. The desire to be without a proper body, a localizable personhood susceptible to the diagnostic-empirical, economic, and epistemic encroachments of the spectator. In many ways, just like *Mythic Being*, *Flying* describes the perambulatory occasion of "pure sexual desire."⁵⁶

What is also tremendous about the dream of flying is that it describes how "invisibility" and "disembodiment" can be infused with qualities otherwise associated with immobility, unfreedom, negativity, and captivity. By revaluing these performative and philosophical conditions as the conditions of freedom, Piper not only cites herself as part of a long tradition of black radicals who,

through “redressive action . . . transfigure[d] the broken and ravenous body into a site of pleasure, a vessel of communication, and a bridge between the living and dead” but also extends redressive action itself to include the processes of objectification and abstraction.⁵⁷ Piper muses,

Abstraction is flying. Abstracting is ascending to higher and higher levels of conceptual generalization; soaring back and forth, reflectively circling around above the specificity and immediacy of things and events in space and time, from a perspective that embeds them in a conceptual framework of increasing breadth and depth, a framework without horizon, ceiling, or basement . . . Abstraction is also flight. It is freedom from the immediate spatiotemporal constraints of the moment; freedom to plan the future, recall the past, comprehend the present from a reflective perspective that incorporates all three; freedom from the immediate boundaries of concrete subjectivity to imagine the possible and transport oneself into it; freedom to survey the real as a resource for embodying the possible; freedom to detach the realized object from oneself more and more fully as a self-contained entity, fully determined by its contextual properties and relations, and consider it from afar, as new grist for the mill of the possible. Abstraction is freedom from the socially prescribed and consensually accepted, freedom to violate in imagination the constraints of public practice, to play with conventions, or to indulge them. Abstraction is a solitary journey through the conceptual universe, with no anchors, no cues, no signposts, no maps, no foundations to cling to. Abstraction makes one love material objects all the more.⁵⁸

In *Abstraction*, Piper describes beautifully the philosophically performative procedure of abstraction as flight and freedom. In many ways, becoming the *Mythic Being* allowed Piper the freedom to “violate in public practice” the systems of racist and xenophobic practice.⁵⁹ The violation itself consists in self-consciously “play[ing] with the conventions” of white supremacist empirical vision—conventions that assume the other as putatively fixed in absence and negation.⁶⁰ In the tradition of anti-slavery resistance, Piper elucidates how those places outside the purview of empirical and rational traffic are profound sites of resistance and redress.

Returning to *Mythic Being* by way of *Flying* and *Abstraction*, then, illuminates how the art of self-abstraction, made possible by conceptualism and black consciousness, provides the condition of possibility of freedom. Among other freedoms transitorily gained exists the freedom of seeing without being seen. A new view point, new visions of blackness’s relationship with the city. As Michel de Certeau argues, being above the city—in his case, within the observation deck of the World Trade Center—means that “one’s body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to an anonymous law; nor is it possessed, whether as player or

played, by the rumble of so many differences and by the nervousness of New York traffic."⁶¹ Piper's movement above the city, above the nervousness of spectatorial and xenophobic traffic is important as it shows how the self-conscious deployment of Blackness as an abstraction allows for a philosophically performative resistance to captivity.

Ultimately, like the dreams narrated in *Flying* and *Abstraction*, Adrian Piper's *Mythic Being* series describes the potential freedoms embedded in the black radical recuperation of otherwise dehumanizing and devaluing practices. Through the complicated processes of self-objectification and abstraction, Piper releases herself from the violence of these public practices. In doing so, she moves above and against traffic in the transient beauties of freedom.

Notes

¹ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 12-13.

² Landon Barrett, *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 19.

³ Adrian Margaret Smith Piper, "Flying," in *Out of Order/Out of Sight, Vol. 1: Selected Writings in Meta-Art, 1968-1992* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 224.

⁴ Hartman, 12.

⁵ Ibid., 12.

⁶ Ibid., 25.

⁷ Ibid., 26 (my emphasis).

⁸ Ibid., 26.

⁹ Barrett, 56.

¹⁰ Hartman, 37.

¹¹ Barrett, 26.

¹² I argue that performances are a fundamental part of philosophy's methodological endowment. My research, in particular, operates from the assumption that wandering is a method that emerges as the limit of philosophy. Ambulatory metaphors are crucial to a Western philosophical tradition in which the stylized or spontaneous acts of the everyday generate meaning.

¹³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's 1965), 340.

¹⁴ Adrian Margaret Smith Piper, "Preparatory Notes for Mythic Being," in *Out of Order/Out of Sight, Vol. 1* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 101.

¹⁵ Adrian Margaret Smith Piper, "Xenophobia," in *Out of Order/Out of Sight, Vol. 1* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 189.

¹⁶ Maurice Berger, "The Critique of Pure Racism: An Interview with Adrian Piper," *Afterimage* 18, no. 3 (October 1990): 10.

¹⁷ Piper, "Preparatory Notes," 118.

¹⁸ Ibid., 95.

¹⁹ Adrian Margaret Smith Piper, "Talking to Myself: The Ongoing Autobiography on An Art Object," in *Out of Order/Out of Sight, Vol. 1* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 30-31.

²⁰ Piper, "Talking to Myself," 32.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 42.

²³ Ibid., 47.

²⁴ Piper, "Preparatory Notes," 92.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 91.

²⁷ Ibid., 94.

²⁸ Piper, "Talking to Myself," 50.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Piper, "Preparatory Notes," 98.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 96.

³⁵ Ibid., 97.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 91.

³⁸ Quotation from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1953), 46, appears in Houston A. Baker's *Turning South Again: Re-Thinking Modernism/Re-reading Booker T.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 14.

³⁹ Piper, "Preparatory Notes," 107.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 94-95.

⁴¹ Ibid., 112.

⁴² Piper, "The Mythic Being: Getting Back," in *Out of Order/Out of Sight, Vol. 1* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 147.

⁴³ Piper, "Preparatory Notes," 94.

⁴⁴ Barrett, 101.

⁴⁵ Piper, "Xenophobia and the Indexical Present I: Essay," in *Out of Order/Out of Sight, Vol. 1* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 246.

⁴⁶ Piper, "Xenophobia," 255.

⁴⁷ Donald Gibson, "Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, and the Slavery Debate: Bondage, Family, and the Discourse of Domesticity" in Deborah Garfield and Rafia Zafar's *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl: New Critical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 170.

⁴⁸ Gibson, "Harriet Jacobs," 170.

⁴⁹ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 235.

⁵⁰ Piper, "Notes of the Mythic Being, 1-111" in *Out of Order/Out of Sight, Vol. 1* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 118.

⁵¹ Piper, "Notes," 138-39.

⁵² Barrett, 5.

⁵³ Berger, 10-11

⁵⁴ Piper, "Flying," in *Out of Order/Out of Sight, Vol. 1* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 223.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 224

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Hartman, 77.

⁵⁸ Piper, "Flying," 224.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 92.